Diana Vreeland in her Park Avenue Apartment
photo: Freyja Ramin, reprinted from Selling Culture

Diana Vreeland begins with two events: Bloome-
ingdale’s “China” campaign in the fall of 1980, and Vreeland’s concurrent exhibition of Chinese imperial court dress of the Ching dynasty (1644-1912) at the Metropolitan Museum’s Costume Insti-
tute. The interest in Chinese exoticism is further traced to the costumes worn by Nancy Reagan and others at Ronald Reagan’s first inauguration in January 1981. The second chapter covers the period 1981-84, when Diana Vreeland presented three shows at the Costume Institute with French Culture as their theme. They were: “The Eighteenth Century Woman” which detailed the extravagant and frivolous lifestyle of the French aristocracy on the eve of the revolution, “The Belle Epoque” looking back at Parisian high and low life just prior to the First World War, and Bloome-
ingdale’s campaign “Pei de France” which immediately followed it. “Twenty Five Years of Yves Saint Laurent” was a retrospective of the works of this haute couture designer who is a close personal friend of Vreeland. The third chapter is an extended review of Vreeland’s memoir, D.V., which was marketed by the magazine in conjunction with the Saint Laurent exhibition. Chapter Four de-
scribes the exhibition “Man and Horse,” a display of equestrian clothing used by the English aristocracy, and notes its sponsorship by the designer Ralph Lau-
ren. The final chapter traces these equest-
rian and Anglophile themes through Re-
agan’s second inauguration and other mass cultural events in 1985. Two other exhibitions, Vreeland’s “Costumes of Royal India” and the (Washington) Na-
tional Gallery’s “Treasure Houses of Britain” are also described. The book has numerous black and white illustrations of material from the exhibits and sales campaigns, as well as the principal per-
sons mentioned in the text and some comparative historical material.

Silverman sees all these events as being closely connected to the expansion of political neo-conservatism. While Reagan and his entertainment and fash-
ion associates posture on stage, social services are dismantled to feed the maw of the industrial-military complex. Sil-
verman has set herself an extremely ambitious project, especially when the work purports to be little more than “a discrete cultural reading to stimulate thought and discussion.” Unfortunately, the issues that this book tries to tackle are far beyond the intellectual tools brought to bear on them.

One of Silverman’s constant refrains is the lack of scholarship and correct museological practice, evident in Vreeland’s displays. She defines a good museum exhibit as one which fills three criteria: correct historical interpretation, public education, and technical perfec-
tion. Silverman has apparently little background in museology and seems not entirely aware of recent developments in this field. Even the most hidden of curation have been forced in the present
climate to concede that their audience is entitled to an aesthetic experience or even simple pleasure. Indeed, it was the enthusiasm of the connoisseurs which first crested collections and provided them with a public. Furthermore, some of Vreeland’s seemingly questionable practices, such as the use of perfume in actual exhibits, were suggested as long ago as 1967 by Marshall McLuhan and Harley Parker of the Royal Ontario Museum. Silverman’s outrage at the use of store mannequins to display the costumes is particularly ironic since much of the exhibition techniques of the modern museum have been copied from department stores and trade fairs.

The lack of an adequate theoretical framework condemns Silverman’s book to be little more than an outburst of rage against forces which she cannot understand. The popularity of Vreeland’s exhibitions is not a monument to the expediency and insensitivity of those who run the Metropolitan Museum. Still less is it an outcome of the Reagan’s entry into the White House. The commercialization of culture has been taking place at an accelerated pace since the sixties and is a direct result of the development and consolidation of a late capitalist political economy. The apparent dichotomy between life and art has evaporated at the work of art itself has begun to incorporate elements of life through collage, and other techniques. On the other hand, social life has been transformed by an infatuation with aesthetic values. This end, one of the major deicides of the modern avant-garde, has been adopted as the most important strategy of post-industrial capitalism. The question of whether any resistant, progressive culture can exist in an environment where there is no longer anywhere that is “outside” art has provided much of the material for the “Postmodernism” debate which has now taken some five years old in the U.S.

It is perhaps because of her own intellectual and class background that Silverman has chosen to ignore this literature. A holder of three degrees from Princeton, she seems to adhere to an upper class liberalization with elements of noblesse oblige. She makes much of the many foundations and bequests provided by industrialists for American museums in the late nineteenth century, as well as the “historical” consciousness of Jackie Kennedy as manifested in her project to restore the White House to its “original” appearance. Despite her knowledge of modern cultural history, Silverman does not seem to be aware that the foundation of museums in the last century was part of a movement which aimed at substituting culture for religion as the consolation of the masses. That the Kennedys were no less media creators than are the Reagans is obvious. Yet it seems that the greatest offense of the Reagans’ circle in Silverman’s eyes, is that they are apathetic, lacking taste and breeding. It is also from this perspective that she misinterprets Vreeland’s gazette as evidence of an unfolding, even sadistic character. They are more likely attributable to a combination of a desire to shock with the lack of a formal education. Silverman even accuses Vreeland of showing disrespect for Queen Mary.

In this light, Silverman’s attack on Vreeland’s lack of scholarship and supposed untruthfulness about herself is particularly irritating, especially when it becomes apparent that the author often fails to adhere to the rigorous standards of academic research which she claims to uphold. Although Silverman is obviously well informed about the social and cultural history of France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (it is after all, less “field”), she seems to have a lot less authoritative on events in China which formed the background to trade agreements with the U.S. and gave rise to itsphenomena as Broomgadale’s “China” campaign. The only relevant work listed in the bibliography is Evelyn Selch’s coffee table book To Get Rich Is Glorious: China in the 80s (Pantheon 1984).

Most of the other items included here, apart from the monographs, were called from such sources as The New York Times, Time and New York “lifestyle” magazine. In the chapter devoted to Vreeland’s memoirs, there are many instances where passages are misquoted, taken out of context, or willfully distorted. To protest that D.V. is “a memoir without memory, an autobiography without time” is to miss the point. The scholarly method which Silverman claims to be defending is supposed to be based on a careful and unbiased examination of all relevant material.

I would also like to point out the role that rhetoric plays in this book. To begin with, it is taken of its central thesis that the hyperbole of politics and advertising in the hands of invertebrate liars like Ronald Reagan and Diana Vreeland has converted culture and scholarship into the doors of commerce. It is perhaps because of the nature of her material, as well as a strong emotional reaction to it, that Silverman is tripped up by her tropy.

She seems unable to distinguish between fact from irrelevant anecdote. Are we seriously expected to believe that Diana Vreeland and Nancy Reagan are in close cahoots because Nancy once “invited Mrs. Vreeland to dine at the White House and she shares her passion for the colour red”? It also seems unlikely that a chance remark by Nancy’s hairdresser, that he “loved Lauren/Polo” hints at some vast and sinister conspiracy to undermine good taste and grind the faces of the poor. Silverman’s comparison of the Reagan elite with the French aristocrats of the ancien régime are just as misleading and inaccurate as Vreeland’s own historical musings. Given her material, it is not surprising that Silverman has blown trivial personalities out of all proportion. Lacking a self-conscious point of view, she cannot understand that there is room for playfulness and enjoyment in cultural activities. When she criticizes the Vreeland persona, Silverman seems to have forgotten the psychological train that everyone is in their own creation. As recent work in this field has shown, the fabrication of autobiography is part of a process of invention beginning in young children and set in motion by the acquisition of language. Where there is text, there is narrative, there are lies. It is the failure to deal with these issues that limits Selling Culture’s contribution to the study of cultural history and museology.

I do not wish to give an entirely negative impression, however. As Burgess put it: “After rereading I am apprehensive lest I have not sufficiently underlined the book’s virtues. It contains some very civilizing expressions…” It does indeed. Silverman’s wit, when it is displayed, is neither heavy-handed nor excessive but points up well the monotonous absurdity of the protagonist. Her obvious familiarity with and deep understanding of recent Western cultural history holds out many an unexpected pleasure for the reader. Even if Silverman still cherishes a dream of the fulfillment of the Enlightenment project, we cannot doubt her good will in so doing. As I suggested above, her failures stem in part from mapping too large a terrain of enquiry, and not least from venturing into the modern museum in a critical spirit, where few have gone before her.

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